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TAGS: PREL PARM EFIN UNSC IR LE SY IZ FR

SUBJECT: MFA POLITICAL DIRECTOR DOWNBEAT ON IRAQ,
ISRAELI/PALESTINIAN PEACE, AND LEBANON, BUT HOPEFUL ON IRAN
NUCLEAR QUESTION

REF: A) 1/16/2007 RECINOS/PALMER E-MAIL B) PARIS 159

C) PARIS POINT 1/17/07 D) PARIS 170

Classified By: Ambassador Craig R. Stapleton, Reason 1.4 B/D

¶1. (C) Summary: In a meeting with the Ambassador, French MFA Political Director Gerard Araud was uniformly downbeat in his comments about Iraq, the Middle East peace process, and Lebanon. Iraq has passed the point of no return on remaining a unified state, Araud contended. The current hostilities will lead to three separate Iraqi entities, whatever their formal status, although the Iraqi Shiite community should not be seen as necessarily subservient to Iran. France remains attentive to how the West can help Iraq. Araud informed the Ambassador that the GOF has considered closing its Embassy in Baghdad for security reasons, but will likely leave that decision to the next French administration, following this spring's elections. In Lebanon, Hizballah is continuing to rebuild its forces north of the Litani river. A spring confrontation between Hizballah and Israel remains a real possibility. Meanwhile, the West should be cautious about putting too much pressure on Lebanese PM Siniora with regard to the establishment of the international tribunal. Araud revealed that the French Presidency had considered engaging Iran on Lebanon at the Ministerial level, but was dissuaded by the MFA -- and by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. (See refs on France-Iran.)

¶2. (C) Araud reiterated French view that the key to solving regional problems is through progress in the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians. Although the outline of a settlement is evident to all, the two sides are "incapable of making a peace by themselves," Araud affirmed, pointing to weak Israeli leadership and Palestinian disarray. In contrast, Araud was slightly more optimistic on the Iran nuclear question. With the passage of UNSC resolution 1737, Iran has learned that it cannot count on Russia's full support, and has at the same time begun to feel the effects of U.S. bilateral financial sanctions. Araud observed that the U.S. and the EU need to work hard to retain Russian and Chinese support for UNSC actions against Iran. Separately, Araud commented that France's Iran policy is unlikely to be affected by outcome of the upcoming French elections, as the two leading candidates have taken a hard line against Iran's nuclear ambitions. Araud said he will discuss with his treasury counterparts the possibility of the French Treasury unofficially conveying the importance of financial sanctions

to the French financial sector. End Summary.

Iraq -- point of no return?

¶3. (C) In a January 15 meeting with the Ambassador, MFA Political Director Gerard Araud shared his views on the Middle East. The Ambassador was accompanied by Political Minister-Counselor Rosenblatt and a notetaker. Araud was characteristically frank, and generally pessimistic, at times voicing views beyond stated GOF positions. Conveying a sense of regret, Araud observed that President Chirac had been correct in opposing the war on Iraq. According to Araud, a civil war is now in train, and it will continue to its logical conclusion, resulting in the creation of three distinct entities (Shia, Sunni, and Kurd). This is a division based on ethnic and national identity; we should not assume that the Shiites would necessarily be subservient to Iran. The broader question is how the other regional players will react. The Saudis likely would support Iraqi Sunnis and the Turks would have strong reservations about a Kurdish entity, he concluded.

¶4. (C) As an aside, Araud confirmed that due to security concerns France is considering the closure of its mission in Baghdad, which lies outside the Green Zone; however, that decision would most likely be left to the new French government. The opening of a diplomatic office in Erbil (as promised during President Talibani's visit to Paris) is only possible if the Embassy remains open in Baghdad.

Iranian Pressure in Lebanon

¶5. (C) Araud stated that French UNIFIL forces have observed

that Hizballah is reintroducing weapons in Lebanon, north of the Litani river. Israeli overflights continue, but justifiably so given Israeli concerns. He fears that an incident later in the spring could easily lead to renewed confrontation between Israel and Hizballah. French UAVs have arrived in Lebanon, but their deployment is on hold pending UN and Lebanese concurrence. The bigger problem is that action is needed towards a resolution of Lebanon's ongoing political crisis, as Arab League efforts have failed, but France is wary of putting additional pressure on PM Siniora.

¶6. (C) Meanwhile, Iran (and the Syrians) believe that time is on their side in the Middle East, especially on Iraq and Lebanon, given the problems the U.S. is experiencing in stabilizing Iraq. Araud believes we need to find a way to dissuade Iran from this misperception. Recently, the Elysee planned engaging Iran (but not Syria) on Lebanon, hence the idea FM Douste-Blazy including an Iran stop during his recent trip to Saudi, Egypt, and Lebanon. (Note: Araud said he and the MFA's Middle East hands were opposed to this idea, as they were not convinced that Iran would be willing to pressure Hizballah in Lebanon or Iran's Shia allies in Iraq.) However, this plan was ditched in the face of strong objections from the Saudis and the Egyptians, who opposed reaching out to Iran on Lebanon (refs b and d). (Note: the French daily "Le Monde" reported this aborted French effort to negotiate with Iran in its January 17 edition, including a reference to the MFA opposition to the trip and the likelihood of another GOF emissary traveling later to Iran.)

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

¶7. (C) In response to the Ambassador's query, Araud reiterated the common French view that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian problem remains essential to achieving progress on other issues in the region. It remains the galvanizing issue for parties across the Middle East, and Al-Qaida feeds on Palestinian related frustration and resentment. The problem is that while the eventual shape of

a settlement is well-known, the parties are unable to come to a peace by themselves. Unfortunately, with the possible exception of FM Livni, Israel's political leadership (including PM Olmert and most of the Knesset) are too weak to take a bold move. The Palestinians, for their part, are unable to resolve their internal conflicts, which bodes poorly for a settlement.

Iran nuclear -- Encouraged by 1737

18. (C) In contrast to his views on other Middle East issues, Araud said he was encouraged by the unanimous passage of UNSC Resolution 1737. It had sent a clear message to Iran and its political leaders that the international community was united -- and, in particular, that Iran could not count on full Russian support. (Note: Araud also observed that, in terms of tactics, the U.S. should not have publicly minimized the impact of the weakened UNSC Resolution 1737 following its adoption, even if that is the case.) Araud also made the point that, in addition to the passage of 1737, the Iranian elections had dealt something of a blow to Ahmadinejad. Iranian negotiator Larijani is now back, which is an improvement over of the hard-liner FM Mottaki. Moussavian is returning to prominence, too, Araud added.

19. (C) Araud stressed the importance of maintaining pressure on Iran. U.S. financial pressures are having an impact, which is encouraging. Banks are wary of dealing with Iranian financial institutions. Admittedly, French companies, such as Peugeot, Renault, and Total, might lobby the GOF to ease the pressure. At the end of the day, however, these companies would not want to risk their access to the larger U.S. market. Araud said he is planning to meet informally with French Treasury officials to try to get the Ministry to persuade or influence French banks not to work with Iran. Lastly, Araud ventured that the change in French administrations, following the elections should not lead to a change in policy towards Iran. French policy -- generally, and in this case -- is based on values, principles and interests, which haven't changed. Both Presidential

candidates, Sarkozy and Royal, have taken a hard line on Iran. The French public is similarly concerned about the Iranian nuclear threat.

110. (C) In terms of next steps on Iran, France and the UK plan to push within the EU for the widest possible interpretation of 1737. (Note: Araud mentioned that Germany would need more convincing, but that it was not opposed in principle to taking a tough line on Iran.) Araud affirmed that it also would be important to send a strong political message to Iran regarding compliance. It is only a question of how and when, he noted. The French and UK ambassadors in Tehran have cautioned that the timing is not appropriate right now, as Ahmadinejad is scheduled to address the nation on February 11, the anniversary of the revolution, and likely would use the opportunity to try to rally the Iranian public against the West.

111. (C) Comment: The compartmentalization of policy with regard to Iran is striking. Araud's tough line regarding Iranian compliance and follow-up to 1737 contrasts sharply with GOF (at least the Presidency's) inclination to work with Iran on Lebanon. Araud's (and the MFA's) opposition to the latter gambit is based on his belief that Iran has no interest in cooperation on Lebanon, but also reflects first his skepticism that Iran would agree to address the issues independently.

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